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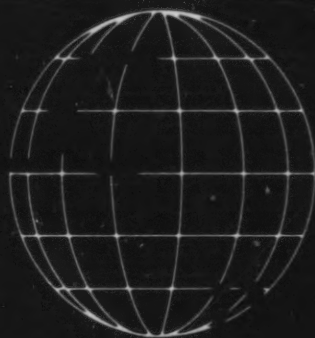
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ABSTRACT

Treatment of some issues in a new Dutch plan for foreign language instruction is compared to treatment of similar issues in the United States. The Dutch plan assumes that centralized, national planning is essential, with the various segments of the foreign language instructional system being assigned interlocking roles and responsibilities. American education has resisted this degree of national policy planning for language instruction. The Dutch plan also gives a great deal of attention to decisions about which languages will be required or offered in different institution types, and to differentiating between required and optional languages. Unlike the American system, which encourages proliferation, the Dutch decision has been to limit and make consistent the languages taught at various levels. In the Dutch plan, the level at which each language should be taught, how long it is taught, and to what students is specified, a policy option not taken in the United States. In addition, while the Dutch plan incorporates a well-developed occupation-oriented language instruction system in the same framework as in the formal school system, in the United States, adult/occupational language training is planned separately. Testing standards and procedures are centralized in the Netherlands and not in the United States. (MSE)

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**IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW DUTCH NATIONAL ACTION
PLAN FOR AMERICAN FOREIGN LANGUAGE POLICY**

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About the Author

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About the Position Papers on Foreign Language Policy

This is the first in a new series of *Position Papers* published by the National Foreign Language Center.

The papers in this series address significant issues in foreign language policy. As the title of the series suggests, their purpose is to stimulate discussion both within and outside the foreign language field on strategies for future development. The views expressed in these papers are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NFLC or of The Johns Hopkins University.

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Implications of the New Dutch National Action Plan for American Foreign Language Policy

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To many in the United States, to speak of a national policy for foreign language instruction is either an oxymoron or a form of odious heresy. Our foreign language teaching system is not only decentralized but devoutly committed to fragmentation. The closest thing we have to national policy making lies in existing and proposed federal legislation providing financial support for a few segments of the system. We in the United States have what might be called a constrained free market system of foreign language instruction, as in much of education, one dominated by private choices made by states, school districts, schools, colleges, individual teachers, and students, but anchored firmly in what is already in place. Most foreign language teachers like it that way, and few educational policy makers care enough to debate the virtues of such a system.

I hold no brief for centralized educational policy making per se, nor for a major expansion of the federal or state government's intervention into local educational affairs. This is particularly true when around the world economic policy seems to be backing away from central planning. However, it does seem appropriate to examine how the aggregate consequences of our laissez-faire system in foreign language instruction measure up against what a more carefully crafted, more deliberate policy might accomplish. In doing so, we will want to look at a number of different aspects of foreign language instruction so that we can discuss in a more informed manner which aspects of our foreign language educational system could benefit from more collective planning and which are better left to the interplay of market forces.

Some insight into this question may be gained by examining a new national plan¹ for foreign language instruction recently prepared for the Dutch government by a committee headed by Professor Theo van Els of

Nijmegen University. There are obvious limitations in using the Dutch example as a basis of comparison. For one thing, it represents a special case even in Europe as the language instructional systems in other European countries vary considerably on many of the features described below. For another, American foreign language teachers would sell their souls for some of the features of the Dutch system: the high levels of student motivation in language learning found in the Netherlands; the unquestioned assumption that everybody should receive a great deal of foreign language instruction; the ability of the Dutch schools to pile on requirements for the lengthy study of two or three foreign languages -- only Luxembourg seems able to require its students to devote more time to language learning; the more manageable size and greater homogeneity of the planning unity; and the expectation that a large proportion of the educated elite will in fact use a foreign language in adult life. In the United States, we are still debating whether to require a tiny bit of instruction in one language, student motivation is at best uneven, and relatively few Americans have occasion to use their normally very limited foreign language skills as adults. However, even with these important differences of context in mind, we can learn a great deal by examining the issues that the Dutch National Action Plan addresses. I do not intend to make one long invidious comparison admiring whatever is found abroad and denigrating our own system. Rather, it is hoped that a review of the Dutch plan will help take the foreign language community in the United States away from total rejection of centralized planning per se and suggest that it is time to begin to separate and consider some of the individual issues we must face. What follows, then, is a review of some of the specific issues dealt with in the Dutch plan, and a running commentary on the

contrasting American situation and the challenges the issues pose for a planning agenda in the United States.

Centralization and Scope of Policy

The Dutch plan was developed and will be implemented by and large by the national government, a fact that neither surprises nor troubles anyone in the Netherlands. The United States has no equivalent governmental planning mechanism for foreign language instruction. The closest we come are some state-or metropolitan-level officers who hold a foreign language portfolio. The states and metropolitan areas in the United States vary considerably in the amount of attention, direction, and supervision they give to foreign language policy. However, except for broad requirements for courses and teacher certification, the center of gravity in language policy formulation resides largely in the individual school or teacher. Moreover, what collective planning does take place is confined to the primary and secondary school level of our national foreign language system. Higher education is totally atomized with respect to foreign language policy. Few if any planning mechanisms cross institutional lines in postsecondary education, and within institutions decisions affecting language instruction are normally made by departments and individual teachers. In foreign language instruction we do not even have prestigious national organizations that regularly monitor educational developments and successfully sponsor reform in the teaching of other disciplines. For instance, in disciplines such as physics or mathematics, committees of the National Academy of Science or of the relevant professional associations serve as sponsors. We do have major professional membership associations in the various foreign languages, and they occasionally address issues of national policy in a pursuit of federal funding or in ad hoc exercises in discussing national priorities. However, they have no planning mandate for the field whereby the scattered teachers and programs will follow centrally arrived-at priorities and agendas even when they are developed. There is no tradition-sanctioned place to stand when debating issues of national policy nor a place to anchor the lever for change once fresh policies have been agreed on.

The arguments for disaggregated decision making often heard in American foreign language education do not seem to have troubled the Dutch planners very much. Indeed, the new Dutch plan not only assumes a

dominant role for centralized planning but also tries to fit all the segments of foreign language instruction into a common framework (except for minority language policy, which in greater part it relegates to another planning division). The various sections of a foreign language instructional system are articulated by deliberately assigning interlocking responsibilities and roles to the different segments, by prescribing in detail the amount of language instruction students must take at various levels, and by attempting to develop what the Dutch call "an autonomous structure" that specifies a grid of language skill levels into which the different parts of the educational system may be expected to fit their foreign language objectives.

I do not mean to imply that all Dutch foreign language instruction, nor that of any other country in Europe, is totally centrally planned and administered. Even in a relatively small country like the Netherlands not all decisions have been made as to what will be centrally and what locally governed. In the Netherlands, each school has a fundamental right to decide on its own curriculum, even if it is fully subsidized by the central government; and most schools are run by private foundations, usually denominational. In addition, there is a general move in Dutch education to decentralize control of all education to allow greater local autonomy by providing undifferentiated lump-sum payments to schools. This will loosen even further control of the specifics of foreign language instruction. And in the Netherlands there are different degrees of centralization in different aspects of language instruction. For instance, even in language testing there is a curious division whereby reading examinations are set and graded centrally while speaking and listening evaluations are done locally. As another example, a central decision has been made that all lower-level schools must teach English to a particular level, but instructional style is determined by the individual school. More generally, centrally developed goals are implemented by the control of funding and testing at the national level and by what the Dutch call "steering," that is, exerting multifaceted influence throughout the system to accomplish centrally determined goals.

The balance between fiat and persuasion is open to continuous negotiation in the Netherlands, as elsewhere. Nonetheless, the notion that the setting of goals and the determination of the architecture of the system as a whole are legitimate functions of the central government is well established in the Netherlands and in

many other countries of Europe.

The Choice of Languages

The Dutch plan gives a great deal of attention to deciding which languages will be required or offered in different kinds of institutions, and to differentiating between required and optional languages. There are four basic principles motivating the new Dutch plan: concentration, differentiation by level, adult use, and function.

Unlike the American system which encourages proliferation, the Dutch decision is to limit the number of languages taught at various levels. The complement of languages offered is constant, based on the argument that education through the secondary school provides a common educational base to all students and the languages studied should be the same for all students. At the primary level instruction is limited to English. In secondary schools, except for minority children who may choose to take instruction in their own language, just three languages are to be offered: English, French, and German. Provided certain conditions have been met, students in the upper secondary school may also take Spanish and possibly also Arabic or Turkish. Barring these exceptions, for most students instruction in all other languages is confined either to the tertiary level or to specialized vocationally oriented schools outside of the formal educational system.

In the Dutch plan three rationales govern the choice of languages to be taught. First, the choice of English, French, and German is based upon surveys of actual use of those languages by adults. Second, a conscious decision has been made about where Dutch national interest lies, defined in terms of the demands of international business, (both on the world scene and in the coming European market unification in 1992.)

The third basis of decision is essentially teleological, that is, it is based upon an examination of the ultimate purposes of studying a language and reflects not only which but how languages are taught. The Dutch distinguish three different purposes of language learning:

1. the need for communicative skills in that language;
2. needs which are linked to the communicative skills, such as familiarity with the culture or literature of another nation;

3. needs which are not, or at best are only indirectly, linked to skills in a particular foreign language, e.g., learning to think logically or developing transcultural empathy.²

These three types of need for foreign language skills are ranked in order of importance. Languages for which only the third need can be argued are not to be offered at the primary or secondary level at all. Those meeting the second need may be considered, but this need is to be met in separate courses dealing with, say, literature, and are not to be confused with communicative language learning.

The Dutch decision to concentrate language instruction through the secondary level in just three languages has its costs. It limits foreign language instruction for all to a single world language -- English -- and two languages of neighboring countries -- French and German. Pressure to expand the number of foreign languages taught in the secondary school is sure to mount. As the unification of the market of the European Community approaches in 1992, there will doubtless be pressure to expand instruction to include other European languages, particularly those of southern Europe that are less frequently studied in northern countries. The proposed Dutch policy also inhibits the growth of instruction in the non-European languages -- for instance, Japanese -- which may be vital to the Netherlands' future. Even with these drawbacks, however, the decision to concentrate on three languages in the lower levels of the educational system and to limit instruction in other languages to the university, vocational, proprietary, and other private bodies is a rational and carefully thought-out policy. The Dutch believe that thereby a proper and well-balanced division of labor will be developed to meet the need for foreign languages adequately somewhere in the system as a whole. The use of the criteria of actual adult use and strategic national interest in choosing which languages to teach raises interesting questions for American language policy.

In the United States we have no reasoned plan guiding the particular languages that students should be taught.³ Nor is there any public discussion of the kind reflected in the Dutch plan on what the ideal complement and enrollment profiles in the different languages should be. We cannot, as the Dutch did, use adult usage as the guide to language choice since it would probably make a weak case for the study of foreign languages at all, let alone provide help in determining which ones

should be studied. Nor can we argue for clear national interest in the choice of language. We might, as the Dutch did, use the geographic propinquity of other countries or the language of our principal ethnic minority -- both arguing for Spanish -- or commercial importance -- arguing for Spanish, German, and Japanese. However, neither adult use nor national interest enters very much into the choice of languages offered or taken in the United States.

One reason for the lack of discussion about which languages should be offered or studied is that our teleology of language instruction is different from that of the Dutch. Their ranking of languages based on the reasons for studying them -- first communication, then cultural knowledge supporting communication, and finally general intellectual development -- is not nearly so widely accepted in the United States. Indeed, we tend to turn this list of priorities on its head. The argument so often heard on campuses and in some of the national foreign language associations is that language study is a humanity, and like other humanities, languages should be studied for their mind-broadening effect or for what they teach us about other peoples' cultures. Whatever its intrinsic virtues, giving priority to this function of foreign language learning reverses the Dutch order of priorities. The effect of this reversal is to make it difficult to argue in the United States for any choice of a particular language the study of almost any language will serve humanistic ends.

More generally, there is little tradition in the United States of making rational decisions about which languages should be offered and taken. Our complement of language courses results from the interaction of three factors: what the individual teachers who are in place are capable of and choose to teach, the nature of foreign language requirements, and student choices. This matrix of institutional constraints and individual student choices constitutes our *de facto* national policy on language selection.

It is interesting to note that in this constrained market economy of language choice the profile of languages offered and taken in the United States has shifted radically over time. Few remember that Latin was the language with the most courses offered and highest enrollments in the United States at the turn of the century. In subsequent decades there was a shift to French, then Spanish as the language with the largest number of students enrolled. German now ranks third, in part because students believe it to be a more difficult

language to learn. Other languages are taught at the margin and together account for less than 5 percent of total enrollments. Moreover, since enrollments in these languages are dependent upon ephemeral student preferences, they are subject to rapid expansion and decline. Russian and Chinese have recently been on a roller coaster in student enrollments, and Japanese instruction is experiencing an extraordinary spurt of growth. Given the zero-sum nature of foreign language enrollments in colleges and high schools, teachers of the other languages see the rapid expansion in Japanese as a possible threat to their own well-being in the academic marketplace. And given the nonfungibility of language competence among teachers, the system as a whole has great difficulty in adjusting to unplanned shifts in student preferences in a situation in which no countervailing rationale guides language choice.

Requirements and Options

Paralleling the lack of a reasoned policy informing the selection of which languages to offer, we in the United States tend to make relatively few other distinctions among languages regarding the proper level at which they should be studied, how long, and by what kind of students. The Dutch plan, on the other hand, makes many such distinctions. First, there are differences by level and by required versus optional languages. English alone is to be studied by all students in primary school. Like most European educational systems, at the secondary level Dutch students are sorted into different curricular tracks depending upon their presumed occupational interests and promise of continuing on to college. At present, about one-third of primary school students enter vocational education, although the number has been steadily declining. The others proceed to general secondary education, where students are in turn differentiated into three groups: those who will take four, those who will take five, and those who will take six more years of schooling. Students in the latter group intend to go on to the university level.

Variations in the amount and orientation of secondary education that students take are reflected in differences in foreign language requirements. When the new plan is adopted, English will be mandatory for all students, including vocational students, in the first phase of secondary education. Subsequently, students must choose between French and German. In the second phase of vocational training, the third language

may be chosen, but a student need be examined in only two -- usually English and German. For students enrolled in general secondary education, English, French, and German are compulsory in the first phase, but after three or four years students may drop two languages. Most drop only one -- French more often than German. At the university level, except for students who have special foreign language needs, all language study is optional. It is assumed that all students have the requisite foreign language skills when they enter a university. This is the dream of many university-based teachers of upper-level language and literature courses in the United States.

In addition to differentiating the total amount of foreign language training that various types of students are required to take, the Dutch plan also distinguishes between requirements for language learning in which all four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) are specified and instruction in what are called "partial qualifications," that is, teaching reading skills only. This is particularly true for languages serving the second and third educational purposes: the promotion of cultural understanding or general intellectual improvement.

This highly orchestrated set of foreign language choices and requirements stands in sharp contrast to the essentially laissez-faire system in the United States. First, the choice of languages to be studied in America is not formally specified, although there is a *de facto* concentration of languages offered in Spanish, French, or German. While there is a greater proliferation of languages at the postsecondary level, it is more the result of historical accident than of planning as in the Dutch case. Moreover, pressure is constantly being exerted to expand the number of languages taught at the level of the high school, or for that matter, the elementary school. Nor do we distinguish between required and optional languages, and "partial qualifications" are viewed as old-fashioned and unacceptable. While some language programs may wind up as *de facto* reading programs, only in Latin, Greek, and in some places Hebrew is the teaching of reading alone viewed as a legitimate enterprise.

In the United States we do not differentiate foreign languages into optional and required categories. For purposes of meeting a language requirement, a language is a language, except for the old Ph.D. requirements that used to specify French and German as the only acceptable languages of scholarship. (Even this

restriction is now gone, although in some universities there is a vestigial specification that only "languages of research" or "languages in which there is an extensive scholarly tradition" will qualify.)

The primordial struggle in the United States is not over which languages should be required or optional, as in the Netherlands, but over how to require a minimal amount of study of any language for as many students as possible. The battle over a language requirement is a hardy perennial on many an American campus. In addition, voices at the national level urge the further extension of foreign language requirements. For instance, the Board of Directors of the American Council on Education (ACE), an assembly of college and university presidents, recently declared that every baccalaureate graduate of an American college or university should have a usable level of competency (whatever that means) in a foreign language by the year 2000.⁴ First, unlike the Dutch plan, the ACE resolution says nothing about which languages should be studied. Second, it relates to all baccalaureate students, undifferentiated by career goals. Third, to accomplish this goal would demand not just a standardization of what is already in place (as in the Dutch plan), but indeed a major expansion in foreign language requirements that would require a curricular revolution.

This *ex cathedra* encyclical provides a further contrast between the American and the Dutch system that is worth noting. In the Netherlands the principal domain of foreign language requirements is the secondary school, while in the United States it is college *i.e.* university. Some states mandate language requirements for students graduating from high school. More commonly, the college or university sets whatever foreign language requirements there are. The universal foreign language requirement typical of many European countries is uncommon in the United States. In 1987, 13 percent of our four-year colleges had one foreign language requirement for all incoming students and 16 percent for all graduating students. Much more common was the partial language requirement: 52 percent of four-year institutions required some students -- usually arts and science students --- to have taken foreign language courses in order to graduate.⁵ Very few institutions administer the kind of course-free proficiency examination that would make it possible to determine whether the ACE goal is met. Two-year colleges, where almost half of American college level students are enrolled, rarely have either an entrance or

a graduation foreign language requirement. Moreover, in contrast to the Netherlands, where a de facto ten-year requirement of foreign language study is not uncommon, in the United States foreign language requirements, even where they do exist, tend to be quite modest: only one or two semesters of foreign language study satisfy the graduation requirements in 39 percent of all four-year colleges.

Given this rather limited set of foreign language requirements, how much foreign language education do American students get? Curiously, we have no data linking foreign language study in high school and college,⁶ so we have no idea of how many students take how much language instruction in which languages across the full range of their studies. We do know that about 71 percent of freshmen entering college have had at least two years of foreign language instruction in high school. In top-ranking schools the numbers will be much higher. Unfortunately, when they reach college, students are often put back to a beginning stage. For instance, 98 percent of freshmen entering Ohio State University had taken three years of a foreign language in high school. Of these, 68 percent who continued studying the same language at the university were placed in the very first semester of instruction in that language when they entered that university.⁷

While we have no data on cumulative foreign language learning across educational levels of the kind that the Dutch system of requirements routinely provides, it is clear that in the United States few American students receive anywhere close to the amount of foreign language training that Dutch students of all kinds are exposed to. Half of our four-year college students (52 percent)⁸ do not take any foreign language course at all, about 50 percent of the residual students drop out after the first year of collegiate foreign language courses, and another 50 percent drop out after the second year. The average number of foreign language courses taken by those students who get any foreign language instruction at all in college is 1.5.

This vast difference in the amount of foreign language training for students in the Netherlands vs. those in the United States raises fundamental policy questions for us. Given the low demand for and adult utilization of foreign languages, do we want to strive for an immense increase in the number of students who take a limited number of foreign language courses? Do we want to raise all students to a very substantial level of foreign language competence, as the ACE declaration

implies? Do we want to accommodate either of these goals by extending universal or selective requirements, as in the Dutch case? Or, given our low starting point in terms of foreign language competency, the American preference for free choice as to whether students take foreign language instruction, and our limited adult use of foreign languages, is the expansion of universal language requirements such as those found in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe the only useful policy option? Should we adopt a more targeted, less ambitious language policy, one differentiated more carefully by language, by level, by type of student? Should we divert some of our national resources into language skill conservation and rejuvenation rather than concentrating them exclusively on first-time learners? Should more resources be put into generating adult use of foreign languages, thereby increasing student demand and inducing students to stay with language instruction until they achieve a genuine communicative competence? Or should we continue to concentrate on expanding the number of students who take a little bit of foreign language training?

Planning for the Whole System

The Dutch national plan incorporates a well-developed occupation - or profession - oriented language instructional system in the same frame of reference as language learning in the formal school system. Most European countries have developed extensive official and proprietary language training facilities for workers in various occupations, and for translators and interpreters. In Finland, for instance, the national government administers a series of training programs and certification examinations. Indeed, the Council of Europe maintains an elaborate network of such governmental facilities. And throughout Europe formal plans usually span both school-based and adult foreign language instruction. In the United States, by contrast, almost all of our planning assumes language instruction takes place only in the formal educational system; adult, occupational language training is what might be called an unorganized sector. We pay almost no attention to that part of our national language instructional system that serves adults, particularly occupational use.⁹ In the main, such instruction is provided within the federal government's own schools or in commercial language schools, and it has almost nothing to do with what takes place in our formal educational system. I know of no planning in the American system that links foreign

language instruction for use by government or business employees, or by adults in general, with instruction in our schools and colleges. Yet it is in such use-oriented instruction that we may develop the higher levels of language skills to meet the types of demands that the Europeans take for granted.

Testing

In the Netherlands, foreign language testing is the responsibility of a free-standing organization of the central government that sets and administers examinations and establishes standards for successful completion. In addition, an equivalent organization develops curricula. One of the hallmarks of language instruction in many European countries is the overt link between uniform curricula and tests of student performance, both centrally administered. While there has been some concern about the backwash effect of uniform testing, (that is, that classroom teaching is bent toward achieving high ranking on the test), the legitimacy of language tests themselves is not subject to major battles in Europe, as it is in the United States. Indeed, foreign language reform movements in Europe are largely about curriculum and pedagogical style, while in the United States the current dominant reform movement in foreign language education has been centered on testing strategy. (Moreover, the American testing reform movement is moving in a direction opposite to that found in the Netherlands and in much of Europe: We have been seeking to establish criteria for tests of language proficiency that are totally independent of curricular content and style.) However, in recent years we have been backing away somewhat from this ideology of isolation in a deliberate attempt to promote a test backwash effect that would reshape the American foreign language curriculum to reflect the new conception of foreign language skills embodied in proficiency testing. One of the paradoxes of the American situation is that the movement to induce universal adoption of uniform proficiency standards is severely handicapped by the disaggregated nature of decision-making in foreign language education. Except for a few state-level initiatives, such as teacher certification in Texas, every battle for the new testing standards calls for house-to-house combat. It is also curious that in other parts of American education, particularly in mathematics and the sciences, there are strong forces moving toward the kind of national testing procedures and standards found in the Netherlands. Within mathematics

there is even a movement toward a uniform national curriculum. In the United States, however, the foreign language profession is curiously almost totally unconnected to such developments.

Conclusion

This review of the issues raised for American foreign language planning by the new Dutch national plan is not meant to be like one long paean of praise for the Dutch system and denigration of our own. The Dutch have their own problems. Indeed, the Dutch plan is an attempt to deal with some of these deficiencies. As I said at the outset, the purpose of this review is not to assess which system of foreign language instruction is better, but to illuminate some of the individual issues we in the United States must face. The fact that the Dutch situation is different from our own does not mean that we need not make more rational decisions on many of these same issues. Perhaps our current disaggregated, school-bound, free-choice-driven, unarticulated, low-skill level focused, humanities-oriented, European-language-bound system of foreign language instruction is optimal in meeting our national needs in the next century. In my view, however, some important changes are called for: a vigorous public debate on these and similar issues in our de facto national language policy would be very healthy.

Notes

1Horizon Taal, Nationaal Actieprogramma Moderne Vreemde Talen, Nota van Aanbevelingen (Nijmegen: Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, February 1990).

2Theo van Els, "Policy-Making in Foreign Language Teaching," *Toegepaste Taalwetenschap in Artikelen*, 36 (1990):88.

3Exceptions to this are the various federal funding programs promoting instruction in the less commonly taught languages, particularly the Higher Education Act, Title VI.

4American Council on Education Policy Statement, "What We Can't Say Can Hurt Us." (Washington, D.C., 1989).

5Richard D. Lambert, *International Studies and the Undergraduate* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1989).

6We know even less about the subsequent language learning careers of students who receive elementary school-level foreign language instruction.

7Personal communication from Ivan Dihoff, The Ohio State University.

8Lambert, International Studies and the Undergraduate, p. 66.

9See Richard D. Lambert, The National Foreign Language System. NFLC: Occasional Paper (Washington, D.C.: National Foreign Language Center, June 1989).

10This paper will also appear in Gerard L. Ervin, Editor, International Perspectives on Foreign Language Teaching: ACTFL Foreign Language Education Series, Volume 21 (1991), National Textbook Company (Lincolnwood, Illinois).